

Microsoft CEO hits familiar chord in CES swan song

January 10 2012, By MICHAEL LIEDTKE , AP Technology Writer

Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer struck a familiar chord Monday in his swan song at the International Consumer Electronics Show.

Much of the 70-minute presentation revolved around Microsoft's work on software that Ballmer has been promising will make the company a bigger factor in the increasingly important market for smartphones and computer tablets. [Microsoft Corp.](#) hopes to make its biggest breakthrough with [Windows 8](#), the next version of its dominant [computer operating system](#) due out later this year.

As expected, Ballmer didn't announce a specific date for Windows 8's mass-market release. Most analysts expect the system to hit the market in the late summer or early autumn.

The Associated Press watched Ballmer's speech in Las Vegas on a webcast.

Ballmer and his top executives spent most of the presentation offering product previews and boasting about plans that had been previously seen and heard. Ballmer also updated a few statistics on the usage of Windows and Xbox, the popular video game console that Microsoft is transforming into a vehicle for showing Internet video and other online content on [television sets](#).

In an effort to liven things up, Microsoft brought out "American Idol" host Ryan Seacrest to serve as Ballmer's sidekick during the

presentation.

The rehash served as a reminder why Microsoft is bowing out of its long-time starring role at CES. The world's largest software maker no longer intends to deliver the opening speech at this annual festival of [gadgetry](#) because the event's early January schedule rarely coincides with Microsoft's product plans.

The inconvenient timing led Microsoft to declare Ballmer's appearance as the last time its CEO will kick off the CES. Microsoft won't run a booth at the show either, although it still intends dispatch some of the company's representatives to meet with customers attending CEC.

This is the fourth straight year that CES' opening spotlight has fallen on Ballmer. That gives Microsoft a total of 15 keynote appearances at CES, which has grown dramatically since the [software maker](#) made its first appearance. The four-day show is expected to attract more than 140,000 people this year.

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates handled the duties at 11 CES shows, including nine straight years ending in 2008. Gates also gave the opening speech in 1995 and 1998.

Microsoft's de-emphasis of the CES puts the company on the same page as Apple Inc. and Google Inc., two of its fiercest rivals. Both Apple, the maker of the iPhone and iPad, and Google, the maker of the free Android software that runs guides millions of smartphones and computer tablets, prefer to introduce their products at their own highly orchestrated events instead of jostling for attention amid the CES jumble.

Microsoft is scrambling to catch up with Apple and Google as more people rely on smartphones and computer tablets instead of laptop and

desktop computers. Unless it can adapt, Microsoft could be emasculated as its still-dominant Windows operating system and other software for traditional computers becomes less essential.

Ballmer said more than 1.3 billion computers still run on Windows, including about 500 million on Windows 7.

Microsoft, which is based in Redmond, Wash., spent several years working on Windows Phone, its solution for smartphones. Nokia and HTC both unveiled new handsets running on the Windows Phone system earlier Monday.

Microsoft's long-awaited push into a computer tablet market led by Apple's trend-setting iPad will come with the much-anticipated release of Windows 8. Like [Windows Phone](#), the next version of the Windows [operating system](#) will include a mosaic of tiles that will allow applications to be controlled with a swipe of the finger. Windows 8 will also respond to computer keyboard command and clicks from a computer mouse.

Ballmer calls Windows 8 a "no compromise" approach to computer tablets because the system will retain the familiar tools that people have been using on desktop computers for years. Monday's preview of Windows 8 repeated a demonstration that Microsoft gave to thousands of developers in September.

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